



Wisconsin, naturally

MAIDEN ROCK BLUFF STATE NATURAL AREA

Thomas A. Meyer
State Natural Areas Program



Notable: Plying the waters of the Mississippi River by canoe 200 years ago would have beheld a landscape quite different than that of today. The west-facing bluffs on what would become the “Wisconsin” side of the river were dominated by soaring, dolomite-capped sandstone cliffs and treeless grasslands — dry prairies — that ran from the bluff tops down to the savannas and floodplain forests at their feet. Settlement of the region by European immigrants brought a halt to the periodic fires that kept this bluff-side landscape open and sparsely timbered. The slopes quickly succeeded to forest, and in short order, most of the Mississippi River bluff prairies and their sun-loving plants were shaded out and lost. Most, but not all. At Maiden Rock Bluff State Natural Area, remnants of dry prairie and oak savanna still cling to the 400-foot high promontory where endangered peregrine falcons nest on the cliff face. Rare plants including prairie sagebrush and cliff goldenrod grow with more common species such as silky aster, lead plant, blazing star and little bluestem. Slender lip fern, hairbell and smooth cliff brake find niches on rocky outcrops. The summit offers a striking vista of the river corridor and Lake Pepin below and is a wonderful place to observe resident and migrating raptors, including bald eagles, turkey vultures and the occasional golden eagle. The site’s name comes from a Native American legend in which the maiden Princess Winona is said to have leapt to her death from this bluff rather than marry a suitor she did not love. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program provided funds to purchase this natural area for this and future generations.

How to get there: From the intersection of State Highway 35 and County Highway J in Stockholm, go north on J for 0.7 miles, then northwest on County E for 1 mile, then west on Long Lane for 0.7 miles to a parking area. A trail leads to the bluff. Visit dnr.wi.gov and search “Maiden Rock Bluff” for a map and more information.

